ALL GAWK, NO ACTION

EXPERTS CAN'T BLOCK GAPERS

By Rogers Worthington
Tribune Staff Writer
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Gaping, whether at a cop issuing a ticket, somebody snapping a photo on the side of the road or a 32-foot portrait of Dennis Rodman with his latest Day-Glo hair color, is as perplexing as it is inevitable.

Transportation experts have quantified the phenomenon of rubbernecking, to the point of figuring out about how many minutes it adds to congestion on already clogged roads. But they have not learned how to curb curiosity.

"People can be so stupid," said Garland Bridges, a truck driver from Roanoke Rapids, N.C., and longtime victim of gapers delays who was taking a break recently at the Des Plaines Oasis on the Northwest Tollway (Interstate Highway 90). "But there's just no cure."

Not by helicopters equipped with huge magnets to quickly lift disabled vehicles. Not by concealing accident scenes behind curtains. Not even by refraining from stopping miscreant motorists, as the Illinois State Police tries to do during peak traffic times. Transportation engineers say little can be done short of removing the object of curiosity.

"If we put up a sign that said, 'Gapers: Don't Gape!' they'd probably slow down to read that," said Ken Jonak, bureau chief of traffic for the Illinois Department of Transportation's District 1 in Schaumburg.

Frederick Streff, a psychologist and research scientist at the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute, said people are hard-wired to observe things that they aren't used to seeing.
"In general, it's a good thing to pay attention to new stimuli," he said.

But a state trooper writing a ticket?

"Unfortunately, people like to look at other people's misery," Streff said.

By doing so, they add to their own.

The Federal Highway Administration has calculated that about 60 percent of all traffic congestion results from "unpredictable incidents," such as accidents, foul weather and rubbernecking.

Chicagoland studies have shown the average motorist idles in traffic for 33 hours a year. That means almost 20 hours are attributable to these serendipitous events and the tendency to look at them.

"To me it's always worth it," said Daniel Dexl, who works with the homeless for the Haymarket Center in Chicago and confesses he slows down to gape. He finds it assuring that people slow down for something out of the ordinary. "It's an appropriate response," he said.

In a 1998 study of distractions as a cause of accidents, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that about one-fourth are caused by happenings outside the car, which likely includes gaping. Few respondents, though, confessed to that in the study.

There are consequences beyond accidents. If an "incident" is in one lane of a three-lane roadway during peak hours, it causes a 50 percent reduction in the capacity of that road, a 1991 highway administration study found. The same incident also can cause a slowdown on the opposite side of the road.

That's something IDOT engineers learned soon after they installed traffic sensors in the early 1960s.

"If the numbers [between sensors] become severe very quickly, then you know you have an obstruction," said Tony Cioffi, who directs IDOT's Traffic Systems Center in Oak Park. "The classic gapers block is when you have congestion in both directions of traffic."
Even if the incident is not blocking traffic, it can cause a 26 percent reduction in a roadway's efficiency, according to the highway administration study.

"As long as just one driver slows down to look, that will slow down the ones behind him," said Kenneth Small, a transportation economist at the University of California at Irvine.

It makes good sense to slow for some incidents, such as whirling red lights on an ambulance or police car, or for a couple of cars twisted into grotesque shapes.

"It's the safe, risk-averse thing to do," said Hani S. Mahmassani, a traffic-control theory specialist at the University of Texas.

Steve Nolan, a spokesman for the AAA Chicago Motor Club, agrees. An occasional gaper himself, he defends the phenomenon as being more prudent than voyeuristic.

"I usually slow down, like most people, not knowing what the reason is for the delay. ... If it's somebody pulled over on the shoulder, it's of benefit to them to slow down, because there isn't that much room there," he said.

There are genuinely riveting off-road sights, such as that picture of Rodman, the former Bulls star, along the Kennedy Expressway in March 1996.

But more commonly, motorists slow down to gawk at such mundane scenes as a disabled car or someone pausing to take a picture of the Chicago skyline.

"I accept it. I don't know what you can do about it. It has been going on forever," said Robert Bonner, a business executive from Lansing, Mich.

With congestion already bad, and getting worse at the rate of 80,000 more vehicles on the region's roads each year, according to the Chicago Area Transportation Study, numerous remedies for gapers blocks have been considered.

IDOT and other state transportation agencies decided years ago that their best bet was "incident management," or removing disabled vehicles as quickly as possible. The green trucks of IDOT's
emergency service, the Minutemen, are a form of traffic triage.

Another idea, abandoned because of liability concerns, was to deploy cargo helicopters with powerful electromagnets capable of picking up disabled vehicles and carrying them away.

Then, the experts thought, if you cannot remove 'em, hide 'em. There was a short-lived effort to erect portable tarpaulin screens around an incident to block the view of passing motorists.

"We decided people were even more curious to look around the screen," said Charles McLean, a former IDOT operations engineer.

A more successful approach, at least on the opposite side of the road from an incident, are glare screens on top of the median. The screens, which resemble a series of cricket paddles, block the view of opposite lanes of traffic and the glare of oncoming headlights.

Message signs also have been pressed into service, but with mixed results. The signs either prepare motorists for what's ahead or encourage them to exit and take an alternate route. The message had better be short.

"We were getting complaints ... that people were slowing down to read our messages," said Jonak.

Some say the answer is to educate motorists to keep their foot on the gas and to maintain their vehicles to prevent breakdowns.

"Come up with slogans that will get people to at least recognize this is a problem and that they are the problem, and not some outside alien force," said Tim Lomax of the Texas Transportation Institute, which annually measures congestion in major cities.

"If people would just keep their eyes on the road in front of them and practice good driving behavior, some of this would go away," he said.

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